

## *Subversion vs. Conformism: The Kadare Phenomenon*

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Ismail Kadare is the outstanding figure of Albanian socialist realism, the only Albanian writer to have achieved an international reputation. His novel *The General of the Dead Army* (1970) has been translated into some fifteen languages, with French heading the list. In addition, the following novels have likewise appeared in French translation: *Les tambours de la pluie* (1972), *Chronique de la ville de pierre* (1973), *Le grand hiver* (1978), *Le crépuscule des dieux de la steppe* (1981), *Le pont aux trois arches* (1981), *Avril brisé* (1982), and *La niche de la honte* (1984). His poems have also been translated into various languages. Selections of his poems constitute the greater part of a volume by Michel Métais, *Ismail Kadaré et la nouvelle poésie albanaise* (1973).

It is as a poet that the young Kadare made his debut (*Juvenilia* appeared in 1954, *Rêveries* in 1957). Subsequently he attended the Gorky Institute in Moscow. He could not complete his studies there due to the deteriorating relations between Albania and the Soviet Union, however, and in 1960 returned to his own country. His Soviet experience has since been narrated in *The Twilight of the Steppes Gods*, a satire of the Soviet literary scene during the Khrushchev era and, implicitly, a condemnation of the Soviet regime in general. A major novel, *The Great Winter*, depicts the momentous situation created in Albania by the country's impending rift with the Soviet Union.

### *The Rebel*

From a lyrical poet Kadare first evolved into a writer of long poems in which lyricism expands and overflows into narrative. Characteristic of this trend are *Twentieth Century* (1961) and especially *What Do These Mountains Think About*, written in 1962-64. Party ideology dots these lyric-epic poems, though almost absent from his earlier lyrical verses. "Poetry," a poem of 1959, ends with the lines "Poetry, / my last station." Certainly, Kadare's poems are better than the versified Party slogans of most of the Albanian poets of the time. Yet his real vocation was narrative. It gradually matured during his period of poetic apprenticeship to produce his first novel, *The General of the Dead Army* (1964).<sup>1</sup> The plot is based on an actual event, the exhumation of the bones of Italian soldiers fallen in Albanian territory during the Greco-Italian war of 1940-41 and the skirmishes between Albanian partisans and the Italian occupation army during the period 1942-43. The novel was such a departure from the track in which Albanian socialist realism had been plodding that it was bound to cause consternation, and indeed the dogmatists and conformists raised a hue and cry. The writer defended himself, but finally had to bow to pressure and modified the original text. But even so modified, the novel is an achievement. Obligatory doctrinal incrustations are absent. The writer manages to write a book the temporal frame of which is Communist Albania without even mentioning the Party.

In March 1966, the Party's Central Committee addressed an "Open Letter" to intellectuals, inviting them to do fieldwork in factories, co-operatives, hydrocentrals, railroad construction, and other socialist targets for nationalization so that writers, for instance, would obtain first hand experience of the economic problems facing the country and then write about them. Kadare's response was *The Wedding* (1967),<sup>2</sup> a "reportage" novel of what happens to a brigade of girls doing voluntary work in the construction of a railroad branch somewhere in Central Albania. Two of them end up as prostitutes; the railroad station is called The Station Without a Name; one of the trains is described as a Trans-European Express with "carriages . . . not in separate units. They resembled

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1. *Gjenerali i ushtrisë së vdekur* (Rilindja: Prishtinë, 1977).

2. Ismail Kadare, *The Wedding*. Trans. Ali Cungu (Tirana: Naim Frashëri, 1967), p. 7. I have been unable to find the Albanian original, *Dasma* (1966). The citations are from the English version, with page numbers given in parentheses (a method also followed for citations from other works). A slightly modified version is *Lëkura e daulles* (The Drum Skin) (Rilindja: Prishtinë, 1980).

up-to-date, beautifully furnished sitting rooms. Loudspeakers played music . . ." (78). The novel teems with sour jokes such as these, which ridicule the official propaganda trumpeting socialist achievements. The following sentence, for instance, is part of a speech by the Party secretary of the railroad station: "Raising the women to posts of responsibility, the initiative of the elderly people of Lapardha!" (40). The name can be read as a compound of the Italian feminine definite article 'la' 'the' and *pardha* — '*pordha*' (def. '*pordha*') means fart (in the 1980 edition, '*Lapardha*' has been replaced by '*Korça*').

One understands why the authoritative *History of Albanian Literature of Socialist Realism*,<sup>3</sup> which dwells at length on Kadare's works, does not even mention *The Wedding*. It is in this novel that Kadare begins to forge the tools that he will sharpen in his subsequent works. Here he perfects his peculiar way of writing: a double-entendre way of writing, allusive and analogical and often allegoric, punctuated by insinuating hints and distant correspondences. It is a method of devious paths, short cuts and discursive gaps — a narrative style pervaded by malign irony in various degrees and supported by such rhetorical devices as ellipsis, hyperbole, caricature, and the grotesque. It is an electric eel-like way of writing, the aim of which is to shock rather than surprise — a use of language that often resembles the way a prestidigitator uses his hands.

Kadare's third novel is *The Fortress* (1970).<sup>4</sup> A huge Turkish army has besieged a fortified Albanian town, which is defended by its citizens, with the resistance leader Scanderbeg operating outside the walls. The name of Scanderbeg, the Albanian national hero who resisted the Turkish invasion of the Balkans in the second half of the 15th century, is the only historical indication in this parody of the 'historical' novel. The besieged town has no name, no date is supplied. Furthermore, Scanderbeg never appears in person. The besieged infer his presence from the beatings of an enemy alarm drum signifying his attacks against the Turkish army. These never see him either, his attacks being always nocturnal. Unseen by both besiegers and besieged, an "avenger" (80) angel to the former and a demonic terrorizing presence to the latter, absent as a person and present only as a name, Scanderbeg loses all individuation and fades into his own shadow. Because the cult of Scanderbeg and the cult of Hoxha have been developing in Albania

3. *Historia e letërsisë shqiptare e realizmit socialist* by a team of scholars with Koço Bihiku as editor (Tirana: Academy of Sciences of the People's Socialist Republic of Albania, 1978), p. 290.

4. Ismail Kadare, *Këshjella*, 4th rpt. (Tirana: Naim Frashëri, 1980).

Albania simultaneously and in association with the country's break with the Soviet Union, the debunking of the Scanderbeg cult works, by analogy, as the debunking of the Hoxha cult.

### *The Three-Stage Chronicle*

Chronicle in Stone,<sup>5</sup> which followed *The Fortress*, brings to a sharp point the author's rebellious non-conformism, this time by implicitly accusing the Communist Party of having fomented the civil war and turning the national war against fascism into class war.

The novel encompasses a period of time corresponding to the Italian occupation of Albania (1939-43), during which the country was an Italian province, with the Italian monarch Victor Emanuel III doubling as Emperor of Ethiopia and King of Albania. In 1940, Italy invaded Greece. The Greek army fought back, chasing the invaders and penetrating into South Albania. Gjirokastër, Kadare's native town, passed from one occupier to another. The Italian occupation of the country generated a movement of national liberation headed by two parties, the National Liberation Front (led by the Albanian Communist Party) and the Nationalist Front (Balli Kombëtar). Soon they clashed. The Germans, who invaded Albania after the collapse of Italian fascism (July 1943), supported the nationalists, whereas the British assisted the Partisans. These defeated their adversaries, liberated Tirana from the Germans, and established the People's Republic of Albania (November 1944).

The novel purports to be a "chronicle" of the city's experience of those events as told by the author, then aged four to seven — Kadare was born in 1936. But the adult author yields to the infant narrator, speaking his language and sharing his feelings. Since a child is not concerned with war except as a game, the narrator is fascinated rather than horrified by bombers and anti-aircraft guns. Much of what he tells is indeed typical of a child's life: playing with pals, listening to bandit stories, watching adult conversation and visiting relatives. Untypical is his precocious sexuality (his "first love" is for a married woman), his passion for reading (*Macbeth*, of all books), his contempt for schooling (a couple of scenes from school life occur, but none is lived by him), and his lucubration on figurative language (72-73).

We shall see whether the author has succeeded in putting himself in the child's shoes. *Chronicle in Stone* ends with a chapter "In place of an Epilogue — Difficult Chronicle." Difficult, first of all, because, as the

5. Ismail Kadare, *Kronikë në gur*, 2nd edn. (Tirana: Naim Frashëri, 1978). Citations are from this edition.

author tells us in the novel's opening lyrical prose, "This was a steep city, perhaps the steepest in the world, having broken all laws of architecture and city planning. Because of its great steepness, it sometimes happened that the top of a house formed the foundation of another . . . . This was indeed a very strange city. While walking down the street, you could stretch out your arm a little bit and put your hat on top of a minaret. . . . It was difficult to be a child in this city."

People living in this "strange" city would not, one thinks, resemble usual city-dwellers; they were bound to have eccentric customs and ways of life, molded by the physical habitat. Indeed here lived "the matrons of life," centenary women "with little flesh in their bodies . . . like corpses about to be embalmed" (32), and who would go out of their houses only in exceptional circumstances, dwelling in them as if immured within their walls. This was the native town of Llukan the Jailbird, who preferred to spend his lifetime in prison, for "prison is the place for real men" (18). Where else could one find an inventor held in great esteem by his fellow citizens for having built a wooden airplane that was to fly without engine and fuel, propelled by the principle of the *perpetuum mobile*? Here old ladies would sip Turkish coffee, nostalgically remembering the days when Albania was part of the Turkish Empire, and then curse the war which prevented them from curing their rheumatism with "eels from [the] Yoannina [Lake]" (19). Kako Pino, whose profession was to embellish brides, would bring her portable beauty shop to the city's fortress, now turned into an air-raid shelter, for "weddings will always take place, at all times in all ages, until judgment day" (153). Here Jorgji Pulo would call himself Giorgio Pullo or Jorgo Poulos, according to whether Italians or Greeks held the city. Here a "hermaphrodite" would marry and a girl would grow a beard like that of a "mullah" (224). Here fathers would choke their pregnant daughters to death and throw them into wells. This was also the city where Hoxha, the communist Party leader, was born and raised.

Portraying these and many other original characters is, understandably, a difficult job. The writer did not want to produce a naturalistic picture of his city and people. Aware of the difference between reality as experienced and its aesthetic transmutation, Kadare spurned facile autobiographies: "There is no illusion more dangerous to an author than the illusion that events will be easy to write about because he has experienced them. In reality the converse is true. This type of work is started with enthusiasm. Then suddenly, in midstream, you are faced with the cold realization that the work is beginning to lose substance,



that little by little it is disintegrating. You see that this is no longer a literary work. . . ." (229).


Writing a "literary" work, not an autobiographical novel: this was the task the author set himself. The work went through no less than three versions before it took its definitive form. Consideration of the genesis of the novel will show the amount of literary labor put into its making.

What could be called the novel's embryo (henceforth A) appeared in the periodical *Nëntori* (1964) under the title "The Southern City,"<sup>6</sup> a sequence of twelve lyrical scenes from the author's childhood. The longer scenes (we shall call them episodes) bear a title, whereas the shorter ones, regularly occurring after each episode, are termed interludes. The second version (henceforth B) was published in 1967 as part of a collection of short stories, *The Southern City: Short Stories and Reportages*.<sup>7</sup> It contains 18 pieces, 9 episodes and 9 interludes, the last three being political.

*Chronicle in Stone* (henceforth C) appeared in 1971. In it new pieces have been added, while several interludes have been developed into episodes. The novel has 18 chapters, a chapter containing one, two, or more episodes. Each chapter is divided from the next by one or two interludes (without title but in italics), usually coupled with fragmentary prose termed "from the chronicle." These pages, without beginning or end, seem to come from a partially burnt notebook supposedly written by the city's chronicler, Xivo Gavo. The "chronicle" pages provide a temporal frame for the episodes and interludes while also supplying a ballast of objectivity for the larger subjective part. In other words, C is structurally different from A and B. For while the first two versions are random childhood memories devoid of a temporal frame, the third version is indeed a chronological novel (hence the title). The memories have been transformed into episodes which are held together by the personality of the child narrator. It is he, not the author, around whom the episodes are organized. To augment this effect, the titles have been omitted — they figure in both A and B. The definitive version of the novel appeared in 1978. It is the same as C, except for the added epilogue. In it the author describes his work as "a novel [constructed] with autobiographical elements of my childhood" (232). This is to say that autobiography supplies only the raw material for the making of the novel. Using one's life to make a work of art is an aesthete's practice. So also is indulgence in the theme of sex — Kadare more than indulges himself on that theme, something taboo to puritanical Albanian socialist realism.

6. "Qyteti i Jugut," *Nëntori* (1964) 12, pp. 3-33.

7. Ismail Kadare, *Qyteti i Jugut. Tregime dhe Reportazhe* (Tirana: Naim Frashëri, 1967).

Sex is already conspicuous in A ("First Love [Margerita]"). In *Chronicle in Stone* it runs through the narrative like a red thread. Already in chapter 3, a young woman appears — perhaps the author's highest female creation — the beautiful bride whose husband is believed to be impotent. The child narrator and his friend roam around her house to catch sight of her: "Her fingers played with her thick braid while a strange magic light flashed intermittently in her eyes" (29). Immediately after, Susan is introduced: "As soon as she heard that I had come, she would run out and flutter around Babazoti's house until she met me. In her flutterings there was something butterfly-like and also stork-like. She was taller than I, and slender, and she had long hair which she combed endlessly in different ways. Everyone said she was lovely" (45). Lovely, and wicked, too. Once she asks the boy whether he ows bad words. His answer is "Che pu[t]tana!," an expression heard from an Italian officer. He falls in love with Margerita instead, a married woman and a thief. She steals his heart as well. To see her, the boy climbs onto the roof and watches her from a crack in the ceiling of her room: "I waited a long time until she came out of the bath. . . . When she took off her bathrobe and bent down to get her underwear off the bed, I closed my eyes. When I opened them, the lace trimmings on her body looked like butterflies sitting in rows on her legs, under her hips, on her breasts, like the white butterflies on the fields that come out in the spring and which I had often chased without being able to capture one." (60)

In the cellar of the boy's house, now turned into an air-raid shelter, the kerosene suddenly goes out from the explosion of an English bomb. When a lamp is lit, two lovers are seen embracing one another. The girl's father rushes out, dragging the girl behind him. Soon after she disappears. When the narrator tells Susan the story of the lovers, she invites him to play the lovers' game in a cave which has served her family as an air-raid shelter. They repeat the game many times, until they are caught by the girl's mother.

Whereas the narrator's sexuality is precocious, his waking up to the reality principle is slow. He has learned the meaning of "occupied city" after much wondering how a city can be unoccupied. When his politically-minded younger aunt comments that the assassination attempt on the Italian King of Albania failed because a rose bouquet stood in the assassin's way, the boy shows no curiosity as to who Victor Emanuel is. His family can hardly manage to make a living, yet the conversations about economic difficulties are "boring" to him (15, 106). He has no understanding of work. Looking at villagers leaving the city

market, he imagines them returning not to their homes, but to bushes in the hillocks where they would “crouch” like animals, waiting for the next market day to re-enter the city. In the countryside, walking on tilled soil, he wonders why the earth is soft and why the peasants have reduced it to that state. In all these acts, he behaves like the spoiled boy of a bourgeois family, certainly not a good example for socialist education.



The defeat of the Italian army by the Greek army, which carried the war into South Albania, was an instigating factor in the rise of the Albanian movement of national liberation, the Communist Party being formed towards the end of 1941. The first political episode in *Chronicle in Stone* is found in chapter 14. This starts with a scene showing two trucks filled with antifascists being sent to internment. The reason is that “they have spoken against,” as a passer-by puts it. The day after, the narrator and his friend decide that they, too, will “speak against” from the top of a roof: “ ‘Mumbo-jujumbo!’ I muttered. ‘Gainst-tantara-bing-bang-grains!’ said Ilir. We thought for a while. ‘Long live Albania!’ said Ilir. ‘Down with Italy!’ ‘Long live the Albanian people!’ ‘Down with the Italian people!’ Silence. Ilir looked thoughtful. ‘We’re wrong,’ he said. ‘Isa said that the Italian people are not bad.’ ‘No,’ I insisted. ‘If their planes are bad, how can the people be good?’ Ilir was confused. He seemed to change his mind. But just when he appeared to be convinced, he said stubbornly: ‘No.’ ‘You’re a traitor,’ I told him. ‘Down with traitors!’ ‘Down with fratricide!’ Ilir hollered, balling his fist” (180).

The dialogue renders pertinently the effect of political slogans on children. Indifferent to politics, they play with them as they do with language in general, aping the sounds and confusing their meanings. Here, “Long live Albania!” and “Down with Italy!” are preceded by childish gibberish. Then the narrator confuses Italian fascism with the Italian people. His friend checks him; he has learned from his brother, a communist student, that people and states are not the same. The narrator responds with a typically childish syllogism, which fails to persuade his more sensible friend. The narrator gets angry and calls him a traitor. His friend, taken aback, replies with “Down with fratricide!,” a Ballist slogan — at the end of the preceding chapter a Ballist chief harangues the populace on precisely the theme of fratricide (173). The first bloody clashes between partisans and nationalists have already occurred. The Communists accuse the Ballists of compromising with fascism, thus betraying the cause of national liberation. The Ballists call the communists traitors for playing into the hands of the Yugoslav



Communist Party and for inciting fratricide to further their revolutionary ends. The exchange of the last two slogans therefore sets up the two children as champions of the two opposite political parties, the narrator representing the position of the Communist Party and his friend that of the Nationalist Front.

What is Kadare's position on this crucial point? We shall soon see that he disapproves of civil war, which was fomented by the Communists. Yet he clearly condemns the Nationalist Front as well, as, for example, when he has the man who strangles his own daughter end up as a member of that organization. The author's stance for neither the



Communist Party nor the Nationalist Front is suggested by the rhythm and rhyming of the childish gibberish: "xhúndrabullúndra" (translated "mumbo-jumbo") and "shtráfta-kallamashtráfta" ("gainst-antara-bing-bang-grains"). The first is a five-syllable Communist slogan, while the latter, "*shtráfta-kallamashtráfta*," imitates the rhyming of the Ballist slogan "*Shqipëria e Shqipëtarëve*" (Albania [is] of the Albanians), the Ballist slogan for ethnic Albania as defined by its linguistic frontiers. To Kadare slogans — all slogans — are jargon no better than childish gibberish.

Chapter 15 opens with the Enver Hoxha episode. He is wanted, his house has been burned down, the children play in its ruins. "They say he is the leader of the war against fascism," Xhexho, a busybody and gossip, reports, adding: "He is also the *inventor* [emphasis added] of that new war, class war . . ." (188). That same day the Italian city commander is murdered, and the next day, Isa, the brother of the narrator's friend, is arrested. He is hanged together with two communist girls. On the day of the hanging, furthermore, Isa's friend, Javer, kills the Ballist commander — his own uncle — at the dining table, shoving a gun into his mouth: "One after another, the bullets exploded into his cheeks, the skull, and parts of the scalp. Pieces of half-chewed meat, mixed with chunks of the man's head, fell on the table" (192).

Here it is the authorial persona that reports; the child narrator has not witnessed the macabre episode. Soon after this, Italian fascism collapses, the Italian army is disoriented, the soldiers disband and desert, some of them joining the partisans. The author takes over for the obvious reason that the ideology governing these chapters is a burning issue which cannot be left to a child's discretion. Now the war against the fascist occupier is coupled with another war, class war, directed against the internal enemy. Xhexho explains: "In this war brother kills brother and son kills father. Kills him in the house at the dinner table"

(188). Here Xhexho is the author's mouthpiece regarding the Party imperative to turn the war against the invader into class war, following the Bolshevik example of the 1917 Russo-German war which led to the October Revolution.

The author proceeds to illustrate class struggle with other episodes. Seeing from the minaret of a mosque the arrival of the partisans, a Moslem clergyman tries to gouge out his eyes with a nail, yelling: "I don't want to see communism." Hours later, a punishment squad knocks at the factory owner's door. The People's Tribunal has condemned him and his son to death as enemies of the people. They are gunned down. A partisan patrol passing by notices that the dead are three, including a woman. The squad leader confesses that he killed her by default. His excuse is rejected and he is shot on the spot after a summary court martial.

The penultimate chapter portrays the exodus of citizens fearing reprisals for having defended the city against German troops. At night, children watch Gjirrokastër aflame: " 'That's my house, my house is burning! Hurrah!' 'You're lying. That's my house.' 'Why would your house be burning? Who is a partisan from your house?' 'My uncle.' 'What about my house! My brother is a partisan.' Then we started arguing about the flames. One of us was bragging that the flames burning his house were higher than those burning his friend's house. 'So you don't believe that all that smoke is from my house? . . . ' 'Smoke does not count.' . . . 'Just wait till my grandfather's Turkish books, as thick as baklava, start on fire,' I boasted. 'Just wait till they burn my grandmother,' said Lady Majnur's grandson. 'She is all lard.' 'Shame on you! How can you talk about your grandmother that way?' 'My grandmother is a Ballist' " (218).

The choral dialogue transforms a burning city into a fireworks spectacle — one thinks of Nero watching Rome ablaze. All these children have learned from the civil war is that they must hate the class enemy, be it their own father or mother. That is exactly the Party's prescription. Does Kadare share it? With the children is also the beautiful bride. She asks the boy whether he has heard about her husband, the pederast become a German spy, " 'What have you heard of Maksut?' she asked. I lowered my head and did not speak. Her fingers momentarily stroked my neck furiously, then became gentle again. 'It's burning. . . . Are you sorry?' I did not know what to say. 'I want it to burn down. Completely . . . ' (her word 'completely' sounded strange in her mouth) 'so that it be only ruins and ashes. Do you like ashes?' I was totally stunned. 'Yes,' I said" (219).

How are we going to explain the narrator's yes? Does he pronounce that word only to please his fairy, whose fascination on him is a constant in the novel? The picture Kadare gives of Gjirrokastër is that of a city inhabited by sexual perverts, sadists and terrorists and other abnormal people. The Italians have built a brothel in the city, to the great scandal of the population: " 'A man from every house!' Xhexho said. 'That's what they say. If they don't go willingly, they take them forcibly.' . . . 'Watch out that you don't go there!' she exclaimed" (75). Xhexho is expressing the wishful thought of the city's male population. Since the honorable family fathers and their adult sons cannot visit the brothel without being disgraced in the eyes of the public, they wish to be dragged there by the occupation authorities, thus saving face.

The brothel is a major theme in the novel. Lame Kareco Spiri, an assiduous client, is shown lamenting loudly in the streets the departure of the prostitutes. Another such client, Ramis Kurti, kills one of the prostitutes. When the Italians abandon the city, a young woman (in B she is shown courted by a young man and, because of that, kept in quarantine by her father) joins the brothel team. Here she is "the **hard girl**," meaning a lesbian. One day a rainbow appears in the sky. **Strangely, the beginning of the rainbow was by the brothel; the end was at Aunt Xhemo's, a house which was held in very high esteem**" (160).

**We have already mentioned that the beautiful bride's husband, whose impotency is the subject of many a discussion in the novel,** is in fact a homosexual, as hinted by his wife's reaction ("she narrowed her almond-shaped eyes") when a group of women chat about Bufe Hasani, another pederast, one who chases young soldiers, taking now an Italian, now a Greek lover (135). The case of a bisexual is more complex. Argjir Argjiri is described as "half woman and half man" (80), i.e. a passive homosexual. Because of his effeminate nature, he is allowed to enter households even when men are not at home. Suddenly, however, he decides to marry: "The challenge was frightful. The man with the effeminate voice was declaring his manhood. . . . The city blackened. The blow was intolerable. There wasn't a house where Argjir Argjiri had not entered, nor a woman that didn't know him. A black suspicion hung everywhere" (*Ibid.*). Having ignored repeated warnings to renege on his intended marriage, the "hermaphrodite" is murdered on the night of his wedding. A communist student comments: "This city has become like Sodom and Gomorrah" (81). A stranger, the only character in the novel who is a normal lover, names the cause of the city's sexual aberration: "In this city love is forbidden"

(155). His own story is even more poignant. Having fallen in love with a city girl, he has made her pregnant. Suddenly the girl disappears.



The stranger has learned that pregnant girls are, according to custom, either strangled or drowned. At night, carrying a lamp, he steals into houses and checks cisterns and wells.

The author's condemnation of the city is inexorable. The beautiful bride wants it burnt down; the child narrator echoes her wish; a communist student compares the city to Sodom and Gomorrah, which Jehovah destroyed because of the sexual perversion of the inhabitants.



The question is, why is Kadare so negative about his native city?

In most of the sexual episodes encountered so far sex and murder are closely related. Analysis of the principal terroristic episodes confirms their kinship. "Two girls were hanged with Isa. The water dripped from their hair. Isa had only one leg, something comic, frightening. On his massacred face the only thing left whole were his glasses. . . . Javer's uncle Azem Kurti, the Ballist commander who had taken



part in the execution, and, together with him, the son of Mak Karllashi, raised the skirts of the hanged girls with their canes" (191).

The Ballist commander and the son of the factory owner raise the skirts of the girls to see if they are pregnant. In the previous chapter Lady Majnur, a rich landowner and a bitter foe of communism, has said that girls join partisans because they want to make love.



The capitalist Karllashi who owns a leather factory also has a daughter, apparently a university student (five or six Gjirokastër women were studying in Italian universities at the time). Xhexho describes the girl as one who "paints her lips red, bleaches her hair, smokes cigarettes and speaks Italian" (189). She is "extremely beautiful," with "golden hair like the sun. . . . No other woman in our city had ever had hair like that, except for one of the brothel girls, the one Ramis Kurti had killed" (*Ibid.*). A partisan kills this girl, after calling her a "slut." We have briefly described the episode. Here are significant excerpts: " 'Get away, girl!' he threatened, pointing the gun. The girl screamed. From behind the door sobs erupted again. 'Throw down the gun, you dog!' screamed the girl. 'Get away, bitch!' said the partisan, levelling the gun. 'Wait, Tare!' said one of the partisans, trying to push the girl out of the way, but in vain. 'Death to Communism!' shouted Mak Karllashi. The gun in the partisan's hand trembled. Mak Karllashi made the first move. The partisan tried not to shoot the girl, but it was unavoidable. She writhed, clinging to her father as if the bullets had sewn her body to his. . . . The partisan put the gun back on his shoulder,

and would have left had not heavy footsteps resounded on the cobblestones at just that moment. It was a partisan patrol" (203-4). The partisan patrol arrests the killer; he is executed shortly after. "There was a brief salvo. The partisan fell face-down on the stone slates. They departed. The two comrades were the last to go. 'We lost Tare,' said one, 'for a prostitute.' 'They're killing each other!' someone shouted twice in the distance. Lady Majnur put her head out of the window and made a face. 'May they devour each other!' " (206).

The episode can serve as a sample of Kadare's manipulative narrative technique, consisting in emphasizing effects while overlooking their causes, or dwelling on them just enough so as to make them spark an action. Here the spark is the word "dog" with which the girl insults the partisan. He angrily reacts by calling her a "bitch," and then shoots her together with her father. Would a girl standing in front of a partisan who is pointing a gun at her father normally call the partisan a dog? Rather she would speak kindly to him, trying to save her father's life. Would a man kill a woman only because she called him a dog? The author says that "the partisan tried not to shoot the girl," but could not help it — it would have taken ten seconds to remove her from her father's side. And what to think of the patrol that arrives just at the moment when the partisan puts his gun back on his shoulder? No less incredible is the execution on the spot of the partisan himself, guilty of "misuse of revolutionary power." The obvious thing to do would have been to take the culprit to the Party headquarters, where his fate would more appropriately have been decided. The author skips these and other logical aporias, resolving the action expeditiously with a flabbergasting finale: **the partisan, shot by his own comrades, is left like a dog on the ground, suffering the fate of the class enemies he himself has killed.**

What the episode amounts to is double terrorism, i.e., terror against class enemies which backfires on communists themselves. It ends with the comments of someone shouting, "They're killing each other!" followed by Lady Majnur's imprecation, "May they devour each other!" These are Ballist comments which are, unlike the other elements in the episode, quite credible, the former being the ascertainment of a fact and the latter coming from a class enemy. The episode, a chain of unlikely actions attributed to communists, concludes with realistic comments attributed to Ballists.

Does Kadare truly intend to discredit the Communist revolution with this macabre, twice-terroristic episode? The last episode in the novel

comprises another terroristic act, one whose victim is the husband of the beautiful bride, the homosexual spy. Murder and sex once more combined. The case of the murdered girl is governed by the same logic.

She is called a bitch by her killer, the word meaning (as in English) both 'female dog' and 'slut.' Previously the girl has been likened to a prostitute. When the one-armed partisan is dead, one of his comrades comments: "We lost Tare . . . for a prostitute" The idea that she is a prostitute informs her person. Now if sexual perversion characterizes the city's population, its cream, one thinks, must have developed vices to a higher and more refined degree. We saw that the capitalist's son raises the skirts of the hanged girls with his cane. His sister, who has just returned from Italy and is shown "bored" to death ("Oh, mother, what a filthy place this is!" [. . .]), must have a diversion. The sentence describing her action, "she writhed, clinging to her father as if the bullets had sewn her body to his," strongly suggests physical attachment.

Perverted sex, bloody sex. In A and B sex is totally free from vicious associations. In B, Susan is interested in puppets, not in listening to dirty words. No pederasts and lesbians in the first two versions. No brothel either. Why then is sex so much maligned in the novel?

Analysis of most of the episodes of both sexual perversion and terroristic violence in the novel has shown that sex is related to politics.

In A politics is totally absent, while in B it is found only in the last three pieces. The question arises: Is the debasement of sex in the novel a consequence of the politicization of the narrative?

In B, one of the last pieces is about "white terror." The child does not understand the phrase, and when an adult mentions "class war" ("*lufta e klasave*") as an explanation, he asks: "What do the teachers do, why don't they reconcile them?" (60) — he is thinking of school classes engaged in fighting. The innocent joke is fully in keeping with child psychology. "Class war" reappears in the novel, but in a totally different context: " 'A new war has broken out,' she [Xhexho] said. 'What it is called I can't tell exactly — a war against classes or a class war [*luftë me kllasa apo luftë e kllasës*] . . . ' " (188). Here the striking feature is the wrong orthography of the phrase, with *kllasë* given for *klasë* — in the quoted excerpt from B, the phrase is "*lufta e klasave*." Why has the spelling been distorted? Xhexho, a city dweller, has certainly heard the word sounded *klasë*, where *l* is a clear alveolar, not *kllasë*, where *ll* is a velar. The distortion is intentional. Xhexho, a traditional bourgeois or petit-bourgeois woman, does not like the idea of class war, as is made clear by the way she describes it: "In this war, brother kills brother and

son kills father.” We saw that in *The Wedding* Lapardha recalls La Pordha. There the pun revolved around a vowel, in Xhexho’s text around a consonant. But if *l* can be distorted into *ll*, so could *k* into *g*. We would then have *glasë* ‘droppings.’ Does Xhexho have this in mind? After having described what class war is, the gossip proceeds to illustrate it: “A certain Gole Balloma from Gjobek has come out and hollers in the streets. He will flay Mak Karllashi, he says. He will cure and dry his hide in his own tannery, and then he will make shoes with it and dance around in them” (188). While *golle* means emptiness, a hole in a trunk (here we have the inverse phenomenon, *l* instead of *ll*), *ballomë* (def. “*balloma*”) means rag. The person in question, as defined by his first and last name — something like “rag riddled with holes” — is a lumpen (‘rag’ in German), a riff-raff belonging to the scum of society. From here to animal droppings the distance is short. (“Cow dung” [216] is spelled out in the countryside episode). And in chapter 2 there is a paragraph in which reactionary city ladies use the expression “pardon me” (“*me nder*”) when referring to peasants, “as if they were referring to a lavatory” (19). Judging from the way she speaks, Xhexho is as reactionary as these ladies.



She also says that class war was “invented” by Hoxha, thus implying that civil war, a consequence of class war, is a communist stratagem for seizing power. Xhexho’s speech on class war is preceded by an episode the subject of which is the “inventor” of that war: “A proclamation was posted on the ruins of one of the walls. We always played by these ruins; lying in distress, they were *generous* to us. We took *whatever we wanted* from them, we cut chunks out of the wall, *we shifted the stones about*, and still the aspect of the ruins remained unchanged. After enduring the flames, it had changed within a few hours from a house to a pile of ruins, and now it was indifferent and tolerated anything [emphasis added]” (187). This is Hoxha’s house, and the posted proclamation is about him: he is a wanted man. The attentive reader will notice that “ruins” occurs four times in the four sentences cited above. The gong-like beat of the word signals a message. What can that be? The same word appears in the imprecation of the beautiful bride, “I hope that only ruins and ashes are left.” Hoxha’s house is ruins and ashes and the children are further ruining it. What the beautiful bride wishes to happen to the whole city has already happened to one of its houses, Hoxha’s house. The relation between this house and the totality of the houses forming the city is synecdochal: the part recalls the whole and vice versa. Both episodes are about children, and burning is a common



theme. Missing from the Hoxha episode is only the wish — a case of elliptic distant rhyme.

Its reverberations extend further. In the novel's third chapter the following passage occurs: "It happened one sunny day in the Alley of Fools. We wouldn't have exchanged this crooked and ugly alley for any boulevard in the world, because no boulevard in the world would have been so *generous* as to allow children to *shift its stones and slates about* and make with them *whatever we wanted* in broad daylight [emphasis added]" (35). The correspondences with the text cited above are striking. Not only the language but the situation as well is pretty much the same. In both texts children are shown removing stones either from the ruins of a house or from an "ugly" alley that resembles a ruin.

The third chapter, "Magic," is a description of a series of strange events shortly after the occupation of the city, an old woman is seen gathering a bride's nail clippings; the milk of another bride runs dry; a man crows at night like a rooster; a barrel of cheese explodes; the city's inventor is spellbound; in a "baby's cradle," "nails and hair of the dead" are found. The citizens attribute these awful events to witchcraft.

One day, while "playing with stones" in the Alley of Fools, children discover "the magic," the cause of the evil. They run with it through the streets, yelling: "'The magic! the magic!' The mothers shouted to us from the windows, doors, walls. They wrung their hands, threatened, wept. But we ran, refusing to abandon the magic. In that *bundle of disgusting rags*, it seemed to us that we had taken hold of the anxiety of the city [emphasis added]" (36). At the Zamani Square the children stop. They burn the bundle of rags and then urinate on it.

Let us compare this passage with the one found in the interlude concluding chapter 13: "Mother came in looking shocked. In her hand she was holding a small bundle wrapped haphazardly, a *bundle of rags* — it was not clear what it was exactly [emphasis added]. 'Magic. They're at it again. . . ' . . . I opened my eyes wide, waiting from one moment to the next for nails, hair, ashes . . . to fall from the terrible bundle . . . Once open, the bundle itself turned out to be a wrinkled letter. . ." (176).

The letter is a tract of the Communist Party, typed by the communist student who later kills his uncle and the husband of the beautiful bride. The same phrase, "bundle of . . . rags," describes the magic as well as the tract. Moreover, the child narrator expects to fall from the latter "nails, hair and ashes," which correspond to "nails and hair of the dead" of the magic found at the baby's cradle. And the magic is found in the Alley of Fools by children, the same ones who shift about stones in the alley and



remove stones and chunks of walls from the burned house of Hoxha.

In his memories, *Childhood Years*,<sup>8</sup> Hoxha dedicated two pages to the Alley of Fools: "But this Alley of Fools is now very dear to me; it reminds me of my childhood. I see myself, a little boy wearing black shoes with nails and upturned tips, descending the Alley of Fools . . . to go to school. . . . The alley is crooked and leads to Kako Pino's Street. How many times have I trodden this street, going up and down, from the bakery and the Zemani square . . . to the old lyceum . . ." (56-57).

In May 1969, Hoxha visited Gjirokastrë, which by that time had been transformed into a "museum city." He must have visited, among other things, the Alley of Fools, so "very dear" to him, and told the crowds (many a picture in *Childhood Years* features him fraternizing with the people) what he later wrote in his book. Another picture there shows children paving the Alley of Fools with cobblestones, while in still another picture the alley appears fully restored. In *Chronicle in Stone* — which was published in 1971 and must have been written in 1970 — children are portrayed as practically destroying the "ugly" alley in their search for the magic hidden under its cobblestones. And once the magic is found, they burn it and then urinate on it. Later, the narrator's mother finds a tract of the Communist Party, which the child takes for another magic. Is the author suggesting that communism is another form of magic? He does not say what happens to the tract — it was certainly destroyed, considering that the narrator's father, who read the tract, forbade his wife and son to tell anyone about it. The two episodes are in concord, except for one element, urinating. Another elliptic distant rhyme, and more transparent than the former.

A further case of distant rhyme is more convoluted. Old Aunt Xhemo, apparently influenced by adversary propaganda that communism means eating the same dish of beans from the same cauldron, worries about eating in common, "They say that the partisans are going to open public tables [*mensa të përbashkëta*]" (202). She is particularly worried because she suffers from a sort of obsessional neurosis: when visiting friends, she carries a cup of coffee and a spoon with her. Years before, at the news that the Italians had set up a brothel in the city, Aunt Xhemo had expressed the same concern to a group of women scandalized by the news: "None of your business!" she said at last. "I was asking myself what was happening. I thought they were going to open this . . . this . . . what is it called? . . . public tables (*mensa e përbashkët*)" (75-76).

8. Enver Hoxha, "Kujtime per Gjirokastrën" in *Vite të vegjëlisë*. (Tirana: Nëntori, 1983). The memoir book is illustrated with many photographs.

"*Mensa e përbashkët*," the author's literal translation of it "*mensa comune*," is unidiomatic in Albanian, while the Italian phrase as such does not exist at all. Kadare has invented the phrase because "*mensa*" has fascist connotations (the *mensa del dopolavoro* was a typical fascist institution) while "*comune*" is the root word of "communism." His idea is to associate fascism with communism by using the same phrase in the same situation (in both cases Aunt Xhemo is visiting the narrator's family) but in different times and under different regimes. Through this parallelism, Kadare conveys Aunt Xhemo's opinion that communism is no better than fascism, since both destroy personal freedom — Aunt Xhemo will lose her privilege of sipping coffee from her own cup. Since the rainbow joining her house with the brothel marks her as corrupt, her cleanliness obsession evidently conceals a moral rot (Kadare has read *Macbeth* attentively). Even so, the fact that he has Aunt Xhemo repeat the same phrase in passages more than one hundred pages apart suggests he is intent on conveying another message, one not intended for the normal reader. The first occurrence of the phrase if taken in isolation makes no sense (Italians had no common tables), and the Albanian word "*i përbashkët*" does not, like in "*comune*," connote communism. It does so only with reference to the second part of the parallelism (Russians do have common tables). Here the trick consists of associating a naturalized fascist word with the etymon of "communism." But such an association can be made only by the author, not by an illiterate woman who does not know exactly what "*mensa*" means, and has no idea of etymology whatsoever. The association of fascism with communism is an authorial idea inappropriately put into the mouth of a character. Here inappropriateness betrays obdurateness, as when one is compelled to express a fixed idea inopportunely in order to spite someone else.

Now we understand why *Chronicle in Stone* was a "difficult chronicle," the main difficulty consisting in concealing a subversive message in the folds and creases of an ambiguous and at times cryptic language which even a critical reader would find difficult to grasp. Choosing an infant boy to deliver that message was a clever defensive stratagem, for a boy could not be held responsible for what he says. But if this stratagem covered the author from eventual recrimination, it made it harder for him to solve the aesthetic problem involved in transforming a sequence of memories into a novel carrying a political message. For, as already noted, a boy is interested in games and fairy tales, not in politics. The author's tactic was to keep the child narrator aloof from politics as long as



possible. In about the first two-thirds of the novel politics spots the narrative only sporadically. There the material corresponds, with some additions and modifications, to that in the first two versions, where politics is either absent (in A) or treated cavalierly (in B), and where the narrative centers on the adventures of the child narrator. But his personality gradually wanes in the rest of the novel, especially its last chapters. Because in these chapters the perspective shifts from family life to city politics, Kadare was bound to resort, at the risk of incoherence, to adult participation. He introduced the authorial persona indirectly, as a sort of prompter to the child narrator, while also multiplying the narrators. These now include the city chronicler, whose fragmentary pages figure in the novel in the form of a rubric; an old woman who occasionally substitutes for the chronicler; and also “unknown people” who speak in broken monologues or choral dialogues. And when these devices prove to be insufficient, the author steps directly into the narrative, taking care to present what he says either in an impersonal way or by having his characters voice ideas and feelings, expressly political, that only an adult can have.



The first political event, the assassination attempt by a worker (not specified in the text) against the Italian king, occurs in chapter 2. In the next, fascism is spelled out in a discussion between the two communist students (again, not specified as such). Stalin is briefly mentioned in chapter 6, described by Xhexho as a “Moslem” “with a red beard” (69). Chapters 7 to 10 tell of the Greco-Italian war and the city bombings as viewed by the child narrator. Chapter 13 includes an episode that portrays the arrest of anti-fascists by Italians. In chapter 13, the narrator’s younger aunt sings a communist song; tracts are distributed, the first partisans appear. Then events move precipitously. The Communist Party is named, a Ballist (not specified) harangues the crowd. More tracts, more arrests and internments. Children shout slogans, Lady Majnur maligns partisan girls, Enver Hoxha is wanted. A communist student and two girls are hanged. The friend of the hanged student murders his Ballist uncle. Italians shoot prisoners, communists retaliate by shooting Italians. Fascism collapses in Italy, partisans and Ballists enter the city. The execution of the three Karllashi by partisans. Nazi troops besiege and conquer the city. Exodus of the citizens. When the fugitives return home, they find Kako Pino hanged by Germans and the pederast-spy shot by the communist student.

Kadare has thus written on the major political events of Albania’s fascist period as experienced by the population of his native town: its occupation by the Italian army, the Greco-Italian war, the rise of the

antifascist movement, the fascist collapse and the disintegration of the Italian army, and the incipient civil war between Albanian communists and nationalists. Kadare has written on all these events, stopping short at the result of this chain of events: the victory of communism in Albania.

Just as the morality of a person is defined not only by what that person does but also by what he or she does not do, the ideology of a writer is defined not only by what the author writes but also by what the author omits to write. Kadare could easily have added another chapter

describing the victory of communism, all the more so in that the novel's last chapter is sketchy (the shortest in it) and artistically inferior to the rest. But had he written that chapter, he would have had to elaborate on the civil war that intensified during the German occupation. We saw how he portrayed the beginning of that war, the atrocities committed by the communists being no less disgusting than those perpetrated by fascists. The message that the "white" and "red" terror episodes convey is condemnation of terrorism *tout court*, the two kinds of terror being the two faces of the same coin. Another chapter would have entailed the portrayal of more such horrors. The child narrator would logically have been led (remember his "Down with traitors!") to love bloodshed and perhaps to contribute to it by, say, denouncing a relative, or even his own father. In short, the author would have ended up by glorifying Albanian Stalinism.

Did he want to do that? While a student in the Soviet Union, Kadare had ample opportunity to be acquainted with the crimes of Stalin. The situation he found in his country after Albania's split with the Soviet Union (1961) was typically Stalinist. The country's swing to the alliance with China did not affect the Stalinist substance of the regime. The Party purges (which hit the Gjirokastër old guard, including one of Kadare's relatives, particularly hard) must have shaken his faith, if any, in the Party.<sup>9</sup> He lived through that parody of the Chinese Cultural Revolution which was the Albanian Cultural Revolution and which he scoffed at in *The Wedding*. At the time Kadare wrote *Chronicle in Stone*, he must have come to realize that Stalinism in Albania was to remain so long as the "inventor" of class war lived.

9. Bedri Spahiu, a Politburo member and Party Secretary for the Gjirokastër Section during the country's foreign occupation, was expelled from the Party in 1955. Liri Gega, also a Politburo member and the number 1 Party woman during the same period, was executed in 1961, being pregnant at the time. Two Ministers of Education, Shemshi Totozani and Qibrie Ciu, were dismissed, as was an army general, Tahir Kadare.

*Chronicle in Stone* appeared in 1971. In 1961, i.e., immediately after the Soviet-Albanian rift and, most likely, as a tribute to that achievement, the Albanian Council of Ministers proclaimed Gjirokastër a “museum city” by special decree. Yet Kadare denigrates the city the Albanian Council of Ministers have honored above all others. Kadare damns the city which is the native town of Enver Hoxha.

The nimbus of infamy the author builds around his native city recalls the infernal cycles where Dante damns his Florentines. The city that has “broken all laws of architecture and planning” has also broken all laws of decency and normal life. Here a father kills his daughter. Here a nephew kills his uncle while a guest in his home, something unprecedented in the history of the nation where hospitality is considered sacred. Here a thief who calls himself a *man* prefers to spend his life in prison rather than at home. Here a girl, become lesbian as a consequence of her confinement at home, escapes from her misery by

joining a brothel. Here the most beautiful woman in the city has a homosexual husband who ends up a spy. Here a bisexual is practically lynched by the population when he reverts to normal sex. Here . . .

Consider the list as the major premise of a syllogism, the minor of which is, “Hoxha was born and raised in this city.” The child narrator (remember his enthymeme, “If their [Italians’] planes are bad, how can the people be good?”) will inevitably conclude: Hoxha is one of them.

The text suggests that conclusion. The conclusion explains in turn why sex is perverted in the novel and often associated with murder, thus paving the way for the outburst of terrorism at the end. Sexual perversion and terrorism are the author’s outlets for venting on the city his desperate anger at the existing political situation when he wrote the novel. In other words, the author blames the entire city for the crimes of one of its sons. *Chronicle in Stone* is the sublimation of a transference.

Such being the case, it is no longer difficult to understand why Kadare chose the grotesque as his main stylistic device. Just as the ideology of the novel is under the sign of terror, the narrative is under the sign of the grotesque. In the novel under consideration, this figure develops from a technique that is characteristic of Russian formalism, Shklovsky’s *ostraneniye*, “making things look strange,” a technique for which Kadare has a natural propensity, due in part to his alogical mind. The novel begins with the ring of that adjective (“This was a strange city . . .”), which is repeated and varied (“bizarre,” “dream”-like) in a series of images, one more fanciful than the other, and culminating in the grotesque: “you could stretch out your arm a little bit and

put your hat on top of a minaret.” Other examples are: the bearded girl, the jailbird who prefers prison to home, the wooden plane of the mad inventor, the city officials wearing stiff collars and “Borsalino” hats at the slaughterhouse (Hoxha usually wore a Borsalino hat), the passing of the city from Italians to Greeks and vice versa ten times in a month, the schoolteacher who teaches anatomy to his pupils by disemboweling cats in front of them, the Ballist waving the arm of a fallen English pilot as a trophy of war, the nephew shooting his Ballist uncle in the mouth at the dinner table, Kako Pino hanged by Germans because her embellishing tool-kit contained implements suitable for sabotage, the shining boots of the capitalist’s son emerging from the heap of corpses, the clergyman on the minaret who wants to gouge out his eyes with a nail at the sight of partisans entering the city, and the children exulting at the burning of their own homes — to name only the more significant examples.



The grotesque, a figure variously defined, is one that combines incongruous elements in an abnormal, untypical, and often absurd manner. Gross exaggerations and distortions of these incongruous elements distinguish the grotesque from caricature, which exaggerates and distorts one feature in an individual. The grotesque in Kadare’s narrative



expresses his disgust for the political situation in his country. What to think of a Communist Party which, freed from the diapers in which the Yugoslavs had swathed it, now claims the world monopoly of Marxism-Leninism in its purist purity? A country of little more than two million which dares defy the “fatherland” of socialism on ideological divergences of principle? A socialist state which takes pride in being the maverick of the socialist camp? A police state which considers itself the most advanced in the world for having declared itself the first atheistic state in history? The grotesque informs all these events. Kadare has borrowed the pattern from the weird reality which is socialist Albania. Paradoxical as this may sound, he is the major realist writer of Albanian socialist realism. Through his sophisticated grotesques, his parodies and puns,<sup>10</sup> the

10. Kadare’s sophisticated techniques and stylistic subterfuges often go unnoticed in translations. The French translation, *Chronique de la ville de pierre* (Paris: Hachette, 1973), while otherwise good, often misses significant touches. Thus, in chapter 15 alone, “ruines,” intentionally repeated four times in the original, appears in the translation only twice; a clause describing the Karllashi girl, “Bored, she sits at the window,” has been translated “Elle reste à la fenêtre à rêver” (259), thus mistaking boredom for rêverie; and the translation of the passage where both the Ballist Commander and the Karllashi son raise the skirts of the hanged girl has only the Commander perform that act: “soulevait” (264) — the original has “negrinin” (soulevaient).

reader understands the Albanian reality much better than through the Kako Pino-like embellished portraits and tableaux that decorate the museum of socialist Albania.

*The Freudian Slip and the Compromise*

*The Great Winter*,<sup>11</sup> considered by many to be Kadare's masterpiece, was begun shortly after the publication of *Chronicle in Stone*. A first version appeared in 1973 under the title *The Winter of the Great Solitude*. The author had to rewrite the novel because of many objections to its faulty ideology. Hoxha is a main character in the work. Its second part (the text is divided in five parts) is devoted to him, i.e., to his participation in the November 1960 Moscow Conference of 81 Communist and Workers' Parties, where Hoxha delivered his speech against Soviet revisionism, as a consequence of which Albania ceased to be part of the Soviet bloc.

In portraying Hoxha's role in that memorable conference, Kadare has followed to some extent the official version of the talks that Hoxha and the other members of the Albanian delegation had with Khrushchev and other Soviet leaders. More often than not he takes liberties through digressions that have little or nothing to do with the text of the official version. One of these is crucial for our understanding his subversive techniques.

The heated debate between Hoxha and Khrushchev has been going on for some time when the Albanian interpreter translates "in Old Russian" a Hoxha repartee, "Oh, you are nerveless!" (meaning cool or unperturbed). Khrushchev mistakes this ironical repartee for a statement meaning "You are without stamina." While the two parties debate the Old Russian expression (which the author does not explain) the translator is shown worrying about the consequences of his blunder: "Could they think of him as the cause of the final break? . . . Everything seemed absurd." What follows confirms his fears. Khrushchev addresses Hoxha rudely. Hoxha bangs the table, shouting that he is not a "vassal." There are a few more biting exchanges between Khrushchev and two members of the Albanian delegation (here Kadare reports almost verbatim from the official version) and then the Albanian leaders leave in protest. The split between the two nations has occurred "because" of the faulty translation of a word or phrase in Old Russian — in other words, because of a Freudian slip.

We are back to the grotesque. The word is spelled out immediately

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11. Ismail Kadare, *Dimri i madh*, 3rd edn. (Tirana: Naim Frashëri, 1981).

after, with reference to the statue of Gorky holding a cane (the cane is significant, Gorky collaborated with Stalin in concocting the doctrine of socialist realism). Then a member of the delegation reports that “*he* [emphasis added] has said that everything must be Beethoven-like and nothing in the speech of our Party should sound like a nocturnal serenade” (180). Hoxha’s speech at the Moscow Conference of 81 Communist and Workers’ Parties: the *Eroica* of World Revolution. Another grotesque.

The reader would like to know what happened to the author of the *lapsus linguae* which occasioned the event that catapulted Albanian socialism from the “steppes” of Russia to the deserts of China. The shocking effect of what he has witnessed nonplusses him. He even neglects his fiancée, the daughter of a vice-minister. She breaks the relation by having sexual intercourse with — of all persons — a young man belonging to a reactionary family. The betrothal becomes a Party issue, the Party candidate gets a dressing-down. His moodiness passes into depression, then alienation, and finally apathy. Towards the end of chapter 19, the hero is shown translating the speech by Hoxha in which the split was made public: “There was applause in the hall. Besnik began translating mechanically broken words and phrases. He suddenly remembered that he risked expulsion from the Party. . . . For what? For nonsense. . . . This is absurd, he thought. Yet the more this seemed to be absurd, the more it seemed to be irreparable. Something in the foundations had cracked that he was unable to repair. . . . Again applause in the hall. . . . Besnik began to translate automatically whole words and phrases” (444). The hero reacts to the Leader’s words like an “automaton,” the world in which he lives has become “absurd.” At some point in his downfall, he makes a halfhearted attempt to establish a relationship with a girl. She asks him whether he is still a Party member, adding: “They say that in the most crucial part of the talks you made a mistake in translation, after which everything broke down” (549). The relationship fizzles out. The novel ends with the portrayal of people running to shelters under the howling of an alarm siren which signals a false alarm for a Soviet air-raid.

The reader, however, should not draw the conclusion that in *The Great Winter* Kadare is continuing his subversive game just as in his previous novels. In *The Great Winter*, many episodes and even whole chapters support the Party apparatus and its operator, though not the police state *per se*. Kadare’s concept of the state remains that of an oppressive and repressive institution. Once he even has Hoxha rebuke Khrushchev in powerful language, “It’s you, not we, who have buried the spirit of



revolution under the ledger of the state" (173). Here Hoxha is portrayed as a revolutionary leader, holding high the banner of world revolution.

### *The Slippery Road*

*The Great Winter* may be Kadare's last major work. What has come out of him since the publication of that novel evidences a steady devolution.<sup>12</sup> Except for *The General*, a chronicler or writer has figured importantly in every one of Kadare's novels that we have considered so far.<sup>13</sup> But the writer in *Broken April* (1979?)<sup>14</sup> is a newly married man who, accompanied by his wife, tours North Albania in order to become personally acquainted with the Canon, i.e., the customary code. In the thirties,<sup>15</sup> the medieval customary code, rescinded by the civil and penal codes, was living its last days. Vendetta cases still occurred, but not as Kadare describes them in this novel. Here the vendetta victim is the forty-fourth in one family in a period of seventy years, i.e. about two generations. The foreign reader will infer that North Albanian mountaineers proliferate like rats. No less bizarre is the case of a village entirely destroyed — apparently by another village, and for the reason that the first village had indefinitely postponed the taking of revenge. The foreign reader will conclude that North Albanians *are* rats, which, when secluded and great in numbers, simply devour each other. The Plateau visited by the writer has sixty-four towers in which about "a thousand people are confined" for fear of being killed (172), and in a village of two hundred families only twenty are not involved in vendetta feuds (194). Why is Kadare writing such rubbish? During the Albanian Cultural Revolution, the Party vowed to extirpate such primitive customs as the vendetta by launching a campaign meant to subdue altogether the recalcitrant North Albanian mountaineers living in the Canon zone. In *The Wedding* Kadare scoffs at this hypocritical policy

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12. A lonely exception is *The Twilight of the Steppe Gods*,<sup>12</sup> an autobiographical novel centering on the Pasternak episode. Kadare was a student at the Gorky Institute when the Soviet writer was awarded the Nobel Prize. He witnessed the ensuing scandal, which he portrays with utter disgust. See *Le crépuscule des dieux de la steppe*. Translator unnamed (Paris: Fayard, 1982), p. 113. I have not seen the original.

13. In *The Great Winter*, the writer Bermema is a mouthpiece for the author. Chapter 17 deals almost exclusively with ideological problems facing writers after Albania's break with the Soviet Union.

14. Ismail Kadare, *Prilli i thyer* (Prishtinë: Rilindja, 1980). French edition, Ismail Kadaré, *Avril brisé*, trans. Jusuf Vrioni (Paris: Fayard, 1982).

15. After 1933, the date of publication of the Canon (Shjefën Gjeçov, *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit*, Shkodër, 1933); the Canon is referred to as published in *Prilli i thyer*, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

in a series of grotesque pictures. His portrayal of the vendetta in *Broken April* is also grotesque, but with a difference: the temporal frame has changed. Here the events happen in pre-socialist Albania, when the country was ruled by a king. Disparaging everything King Zog did (he also did some good things; his courts and *gendarmérie* helped force the penal code upon the mountaineers, thus bringing down the vendetta rate) has been a consistent policy of the Communist regime. Kadare seconds that policy by drawing a picture of North Albania as a zone where the Canon was flourishing in the thirties just as in the old days.

The subject of *The Three-Arch Bridge* (1980?) is the immuring of a mason in a bridge.<sup>16</sup> Legends in Albania as well as in other Balkan countries tell of human beings immured in the foundations of fortresses (the Rozafat in Shkodër) and bridges (the Arta Bridge). According to the Rozafat legend, the masons building the fortress could not finish their work because the walls they raised during the day were mysteriously demolished at night. An old passer-by told them that for the walls to stand, a human victim had to be laid in the wall's foundations. In Kadare's novel, one of the masons building the bridge is a victim of business competition.

In 1377, a rich "banker" (135) who had made a fortune by extracting and selling Albanian bitumen obtains from the local lord the right to build a bridge on a river which had until then been crossed on rafts and pontoons belonging to a rich man who had bought "all the ferryboats of the rivers, bays, and lakes" (17). The agent of the ferryboat tycoon bribes one of the masons, who spoils by night the work done during the day. The agent of the bitumen tycoon has the mason killed and walled up in the first arch. Thanks to this terroristic act, the bridge is built, and a toll for passage over it is levied. Kadare parodies Marxism by describing the clash of interests between two medieval magnates as a competitive struggle between present-day monopoly capitalists.

The novel also has an allegorical aspect, pivoting on the author's idea that Albania's destiny is marked by its geographical position "at the crossroads of history between the West and the East" (129). The country has always been a passageway, a bridge — a "three-arch bridge," each arch standing for a long period of the country's foreign occupation: Roman, Byzantine, and Turkish. The immured mason is emblematic for the victimized Albanian people. The medieval clash between Byzantines and Turks adumbrates the antagonism between the Soviet Union and China over Albania, contested by both of them.

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16. Ismail Kadare, *Ura me tri harqe* (Prishtinë: Rilindja, 1980). French edition, Ismail Kadaré, *Le Pont aux trois arches*. Trans. Jusuf Vroni, (Paris: Fayard, 1981).

The imbrication of the modern allegory upon the medieval one has a counterpart in the superposition of the two different solutions given to the immuring episode. We already know one of them: the mason was killed by the banker's men. The other version is that he let himself be killed under the promise of an indemnity to be paid to his family. The mason sells his life for an indemnity just as a proletarian sells his labor for a salary — a *reductio ad absurdum* of the Marxist theory of wages.

We may turn to Kadare's story "A Dossier for Homer."<sup>17</sup> In it two Irish students of Homer living in New York sometime in the thirties learn Albanian after hearing on the radio a well-known professor define Albania as "the last laboratory" "still producing a poetic material similar to that of Homer" (8: 134). They go to Albania and rent a room in an inn where rhapsodes stay overnight. After recording many epic songs and comparing their variants, they reach the conclusion that the songs are fragments of an old epic poem which was destroyed by the Turkish invasion of the country. One day a Serbian priest visits the Irish students. Their opinion that the rhapsodies are originally Albanian and that the Slavs took them from the Albanians upsets the priest. He travels to the cave of an Albanian hermit, apparently of the same (Catholic) religion, and convinces him that the Irishmen are killing the old songs by "capturing" their voices inside their cursed tape recorder (9: 138). The hermit and some of his acolytes assail the inn and destroy the apparatus, together with all the recordings. An Albanian newspaper comments: "This is not the first time that the chauvinist grand Serbs hit the scientists who study the antiquity of the Albanian ethos and culture. A savage barbarian jealousy, the result, among other things, of their inferiority complex, possesses them, especially when they hear that the Albanians are the descendants of the Illyrians" (9: 168).

Kadare's slavophobia, which permeates the *Twilight of the Steppe Gods* as well, is hardly different from that pervading *The Mountain Lute*, an epos by the Franciscan Father Gjergj Fishta, a major Gheg (North) Albanian poet, banned from the history of Albanian literature allegedly for his chauvinism. Undeterred, Kadare quotes Fishta in support of his own slavophobia: "We were born in hatred of each other," (8: 163). How, one wonders, does he dare write things such as these, which are at loggerheads with official ideology? The answer is that he has Hoxha's imprimatur.

During the 1982 Plenum of the League of Albanian Writers and Artists

17. Ismail Kadare, "Një dosje për Homerin," *Nëntori* (1982) 8: 111-64 and (1982) 9: 98-170.

(LAWA), its President, Deitëro Agolli criticized Kadare for his "subjectivist treatment of historical material and legends," even to the point of an "excessive modernization and actualization" which results in "mannerism."<sup>18</sup> In his intervention at that Plenum, Kadare begins by accepting criticism regarding "disproportion between actual and historical themes" in his works.<sup>19</sup> But once he has paid lip service to the time-honored communist practice of "autocritique," he counterattacks, taking the lead from Hoxha's saying that "the times demand the enlargement of the thematic range . . . in order that the great tableau of socialist realism be completed by writers and artists" (101). "Not schematism, but real life, not poverty, but richness, not narrowness, but breadth." And since he cannot take himself as an example of such a way of writing, he takes, yes, *him*: "The ensemble of memoirs of Comrade Enver Hoxha is an example of creating complex tableaux involving national and international problems and great themes in their whole gamut: dramatic, lyric, meditative, sarcastic. This [is a] major ensemble, possessed of an extraordinary breathing space and horizon, and the action of which covers unparalleled ground . . ." (106). He goes on for a whole page, raising to the seven skies "the memoirs of Comrade Enver [as] a very important new factor for the further development of our literature."

In the last few years, Hoxha has devoted the greater part of his time to writing books, most of which are memoirs.<sup>20</sup> This has prompted his worshippers to declare him a major writer. References to Hoxha as such have appeared in newspapers and periodicals. It is quite possible that the superlatives weaving Kadare's panegyric come from these sources (he uses this tactic in *The Wedding*). But, again, how many will understand his Mephistophelic serenade? The normal reader will take what he writes at face value. Taking the lead from the great Albanian writer, the literary hacks will sanction Hoxha as a major writer in his own right. In fact, this has already occurred. The May 1984 issue of *Nëntori*, the organ of LAWLA, has an editorial about the 3rd LAWLA Congress, in which Hoxha

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18. Dritëro Agolli, "Report to the LAWLA Plenum (18-19 March, 1982)," *Nëntori* (1982) 4: 50.

19. *Nëntori* (1982) 5: 106-07.

20. Between 1978 and 1984, the following books by Hoxha have been published by the Institute of Marxist-Leninist Studies: *Yugoslav Self-Administration — a Capitalist Theory and Practice* (1978), *Imperialism and Revolution* (1978), *With Stalin — Memoirs* (1979), *Reflections on China*, 2 vols. (1979), *Eurocommunism is Anti-Communism* (1980?), *The Khrushchevites — Memoirs* (1980), *Kur lindi Partia* (When the Party Was Born) — *Memoirs* (1981), *The Anglo-American Threat — Memoirs* (1982), *The Titoites — Historical Notes* (1982), *Vite të vegjëlisë* (Childhood Years) — *Memoirs* (8 *Nëntori*, 1983), *Mes njerëzve të thjeshtë* (Among Simple People) — *Memoirs* (8 *Nëntori*, 1984).

participated. It reads, in part: "The report and the discussions stressed the synthetic and analytic values of Enver Hoxha's works, their political and ideological thought as well as the literary and artistic coloring of many of them, always a source of orientation and inspiration, and an example of a realistic treatment of events and types, contingent on their clear and unforgettable portrayals, their vivid language, elegant and scientific and also popular, with a rich phraseology" (12). The passage reiterates, *sans* superlatives, what Kadare had said about Hoxha as a writer in his intervention at the 1982 LAWA Plenum.

The scenario of Kadare's latest novel, *The Niche of Shame* (1983?),<sup>21</sup> is laid in both Albania and Turkey in the first quarter of the 19th century. This period saw the rise of Ali Pasha Tepelena, a South Albanian who created a virtually independent state comprising South Albania and most of North Greece within the frame of the Ottoman Empire. In 1822, "The Lion of Yoannina" (that city was his capital) was finally done away with. His death is the focus of Kadare's novel. The author has Ali Pasha's head placed in "the niche of shame," situated in Istanbul's main square to help the populace realize what sort of fate was destined for rebellious pashas and other high dignitaries unfaithful to the Sultan.

*The Niche of Shame* is another allegorical novel. The Imperial Purveyor of Heads, whose duty is to supply the niche with fresh heads, is shown crossing zones that the Ottoman "superstate" defines as "denationalized," the denationalization being achieved by clever methods called "*cra-cra*." They consist first in the physical repression of rebellion, followed by suppression of the very idea of rebellion through "amputation" of culture and customs, "mutilation" of the language, and "weakening of national memory" (178). The added detail that those persistent in evoking national memories are confined to "psychiatric hospitals" (186) leaves little doubt that the Ottoman superstate is an allegory for the Soviet Union.

Ali Pasha's attempt to transform a *pashalik* with "limited autonomy" into "the state of Albania" (126) ends in failure because Albanians do not follow the despot as they did Scanderbeg. According to the author, the Albanians followed Scanderbeg because he had a great idea, completely new for his time: "the victorious rebellion of a state against a superstate" (138). Ali Pasha is "jealous" of Scanderbeg. "Yet his jealousy was still more acute for the future statesman who would achieve" what seems inevitable to Ali Pasha, "the resurrection of Albania" (129).

21. Ismail Kadare, *Pashallëqe e mëdha* (Prishtinë: Rilindja, 1980). French edition: Ismail Kadaré, *La Niche de la honte*. Trans. Jusuf Vrioni, (Paris: Fayard, 1984).

Albanian historiography portrays Ali Pasha as a forerunner of Albanian independence. Hoxha has been exalted — not only by Albanians — as the one who heroically withstood the pressure of first the US and then the USSR. Indeed, who other than he deserves to engrave on his coat of arms the motto of the State against the Superstate? So Enver Hoxha is the new Scanderbeg. The allegory crops up with particular clarity in the last two chapters of the novel. The population of the “*cra-cra*,” province crossed by the Purveyor have become, after two centuries of “*cra-cra*,” completely moronized. They smoke hashish, dress uniformly, know nothing of the past, and have lost their language, in place of which they use a poor official jargon characterized by a thoroughgoing antinomous system: life/unlife, time/nontime, etc. These people are silent and respectful. Their major entertainment is the show of heads provided by the Purveyor. But the Purveyor never stops in the “troubled lands,” for there the people are wild and he is afraid of them. These people, great alcohol drinkers, kill each other in brawls instigated by the state.

Kadare is once more availing himself of his favorite weapon, the grotesque, to describe Stalin’s policy of denationalization in the Soviet Union. But has not something similar, *mutatis mutandis*, already happened in Stalinist Albania? The “troubled lands” of North Albania were militarily conquered and repressed. The Tosk (South) dialect of the conquerors became the official language from the outset. It took, however, more than two decades to promulgate the basically Tosk concoction known as the “unified literary language” as the national language. Yet, while showing some patience with the language policy regarding Ghegs, the regime was quick to “amputate” vital parts of Gheg culture. It banned from the schools most of their writers, jailed and killed Christian and Moslem priests, converted churches and mosques into storage houses and gymnasiums. The Party was even fiercer with regard to customs: it declared war on all kinds of religious practices, outlawed the highland customary code as a whole, undermined some traditional virtues and in particular the *besë* (word of honor) by substituting for it loyalty to the Party, displaced families from their native sites and interfered with family life and personal ways of life when these were incompatible with communist ethics. As to the weakening of national memory, history was rewritten to fit official ideology, grossly distorting and even ignoring historical facts. This method of falsifying history was applied not only to the pre-socialist period

of Albanian history,<sup>22</sup> but also to the socialist period itself. Following a well-known pattern used in the exegesis of the Sacred Scriptures, bits and pieces of past history were interpreted as prefiguring the advent of Stalinist Albania, with Scandereg a forerunner of Hoxha, and Albanian socialism the fulfillment of the Albanian Risorgimento.

*The Niche of Shame* is thus another muddled allegorical novel in which history is so manipulated as to subvert a system while upholding its very pillar. In the last few years Kadare has often travelled abroad, functioning as a minister without portfolio for cultural exchanges with Western countries. He has reached a stature unique in his country, and his international reputation is perhaps second only to that of his master. A movie of his *General of the Dead Army* with Marcello Mastroianni and Michel Piccoli as actors has been shot. Rumors are that his French admirers intend to propose him for the Nobel Prize in literature. The *do ut des* gentlemen's agreement between Kadare and Hoxha has paid well. It marks another memorable stage in the history of the unholy alliance between dictatorial power and literary talent. For Kadare is, no doubt, a very talented writer, the only Albanian to stand comparison with contemporary representatives of the narrative genre. One only wishes him a decent attitude. I say decent, artists being not necessarily expected to be examples of moral heroism. In order to be able to express themselves in dictatorial regimes, they have to survive. Yet there are manners of survival and degrees of compromise, without playing a double game or selling out.

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22. See Arshi Pipa, *Albanian Literature: Social Perspectives*. Albanische Forschungen, vol. 19, (unich: Trofenik, 1978), pp. 171-72.